

Anatomy Creative Projects 12/11/03

[REDACTED], thank you for participating in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. I loved the split-head sketch. It made me think of “what lies beneath...,” of course in a literal sense, but also figuratively. There is so much emotional, spiritual, and social complexity that is contained within each of us, within every doctor and every patient, beneath our socially conventional facades. Also, I got the uncanny feeling that the “living” half of the face was somehow staring at the cadaver side, so that the sketch also became for me a *memento mori*, a reminder of death. The intimation of unknown (and perhaps treacherous or dangerous) depths in the context of the certainty of physical death was underlined by the stark blackness of the background. All troubling, disturbing, and truthful. Thanks for sharing this work. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED]. Thank you for participating in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. You obviously have some talent for drawing. What struck me initially about your sketch was the careful attention to detail, the shading of the scalpel, the curve of a finger, the hollow of the cadaver’s neck. Looking more closely, it seemed to me as though the scalpel was held almost like a pencil, and that the chest of the cadaver was so smooth and flat that it was like a piece of paper. In this interpretation, it would be possible to think that the hand poised above the cadaver might be about to make a “sketch” of its own, as the student (artist) begins to make (draw the line for) the incision, pointing to a unity of the artist’s work and the student’s work (and the artist and the student!). Finally, it did not escape me that the scalpel is positioned above the left breast, so that perhaps the drawing is also about revealing the “heart” of anatomy, just as in the dissection to come, the literal heart will be exposed. Anyway, as you can see, your sketch made me think! Thank you for this fine work. Dr. Shapiro

[REDACTED], thanks for choosing to participate in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. I really liked your poem and appreciated the detail with which you came to know the hands of your cadaver. Your use of language is simple, yet powerful. You are able to compress a lot of insight and feeling into each short, deceptively straightforward line. The progression of the poem is great – from the rather general opening line about hands, to your cadaver’s hands, to your own. Through this poem, you reveal your connection to your cadaver. From her hand to yours... Thank you for this lovely writing. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

Thank you for participating in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. You turned in a beautiful picture, which raises many fascinating questions. Physicians are healers surely, but do they sometimes overstep their bounds and “raise the dead” to create a kind of zombie nether-state (as in Lord of the Rings’ armies of the dead). Is resurrection the responsibility of God, or are there ways in which physicians can legitimately help “resurrect” patients from illness to health? Are the resurrections of the spirit to which we

can all aspire? Hmm... There's a good chance your project had nothing whatsoever to do with any of these ideas. Feel free to enlighten me, but I really liked it in any case.
Regards, Dr. Shapiro

██████████
██████, this was a great project! Thanks for submitting it. It's all about what we can control and what we can't, what we can protect ourselves from and where we will always be vulnerable. You brilliantly take the precautions, procedures, and practices of anatomy lab and translate them into metaphors for *understanding* anatomy lab, and your place within it. The poem itself is a marvelous dissection of the process and meaning of anatomy, and of life. How profound to have discovered the soul within the cadaver!

Still... after all is said and done, don't you think triple gloving helps just a little? ☺
Regards, Dr. Shapiro

██████████
Hi ██████. Thank you for participating in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. Your poem is a great exercise in point-of-view writing. You imagine beautifully and vividly the thoughts, emotions, and life of your cadaver. What a paradox that, in writing this poem, the student who "knows nothing but the names" of the body parts is able to see the rich life of his cadaver. Excellent! Regards, Dr. Shapiro

██████████
Hi ██████. I'm glad to see you decided to participate in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. This is a wonderful piece of point-of-view writing. What I liked in particular was your awareness of the *mutuality* of the anatomy experience. In this essay, you make very clear that the cadaver is not some passive, dead thing that lies on the table and is done to. This cadaver has a voice, a perspective, and a presence. It is a profound insight that what is transpiring between student and cadaver is indeed an intimate act. As intimate as sex. It is a real exchange, an interaction, and well justifies the cliché that "your cadaver is your first patient." You've just discovered how it happens that patients become "a part of your life." Beautiful work, ██████. Thank you so much. Dr. Shapiro

██████████
Hi ██████. Thanks for deciding to participate in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. I didn't get to hear your song (no tape yet), but I still liked it. A song is an excellent choice of artistic medium because it contains language to express your core ideas about anatomy, but also uses music to infuse these ideas with poignancy and emotion. I really liked the image of a cold and spooky cadaver singing its medical student an encouraging, albeit cautionary, tune. I'm looking forward to the CD! Regards, Dr. Shapiro

██████████
Hi ██████. Thank you for participating in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. I really enjoyed your essay. You considered the cliché of "your cadaver is your first patient" and took it to hilarious heights! But beyond the laughter I think I heard the fundamental truth that this cadaver is your patient, and it is your first opportunity to begin to organize and

practice your doctor-patient relationship and communication skills. I hope at least that Mrs. Jones feels better after her visit ☺ Regards, Dr. Shapiro

██████████
██████████, thank you for choosing to complete the Anatomy Creative Projects option. You did a great job of capturing the voice and perspective of your cadaver. I very much liked the repetition of the line “scalpel cutting through.” It both unified the stanzas of the poem and brought into focus a core image of the anatomy experience. Although the book metaphor is a familiar one, you make it your own by your reference to the anatomy textbook. So the question that remains is, will your future patients be an open book? If you bring the care and imagination you showed in crafting this poem to them, the answer will be yes. Thank you very much for this work. Dr. Shapiro

██████████
Hi ██████████. I’m glad you decided to participate in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. You produced a thoughtful and insightful essay. Is the cadaver a (no longer living) human? Your first patient? A model (albeit an irritatingly inaccurate one)? The answer is probably all these things and more... and yet not exactly any of them. Your description of the approach to the first incision made me think that, before commencing with the functional aspects of dissection, there should be some more ritualistic laying on of hands – or perhaps even holding hands! – with the cadaver, some way of establishing a connection that is not brutal or eviscerating. In any event, I appreciated your honestly and eloquently sharing your initial struggles to understand this relationship. Thank you. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

██████████
Hi ██████████. I’m glad you decided to participate in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. Wow – fantastic metaphor for anatomy lab. It shocks because of its apparent incongruence, but ultimately rings so true. Your writing is astonishing: “...clearly knitted in the womb of the master’s mind...” What a provocative image! I guess it would have been too much to include a reference to Michelangelo’s God (the ultimate Master) Creates Adam. The mutilation of “art” in the divine image by unskilled and clumsy neophytes and your own sense of “brokenness” are incredibly moving. Clearly, there are multiple ways of conceptualizing and understanding the anatomy experience, but this sense of loss and wreckage is inevitably part of it, and you capture it perfectly. Yet Andromeda (who was freed from a terrible fate by Perseus and went on to live a long and happy life, only to be reunited with her lover eternally in the night sky) is somehow a more hopeful allusion than the content of the essay would suggest. It leads me to hope that there is more to anatomy than meets the eye! Thank you for this exceptionally well-written and well-conceived essay. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

██████████
██████████, thank you for participating in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. I’m very sorry to learn of the death of your grandfather. But your visits to the nursing home led to your discovering a critical insight about how people in the health professions often experience patients at the end of life, especially those who have been debilitated and

reduced by stroke, multiple sclerosis, or other devastating diseases. Sometimes it *is* hard to find their humanity without speech, movement, or cognition. Under These conditions, it is often the family members who can help lead us in the right direction.

The remainder of your essay uses your cadaver's painted toenails (great!) to raise some important questions that, as you rightly suspect, are rarely asked. What are the effects of donation on the family members? Does it impede their sense of closure? Do they experience anxiety regarding the treatment of their loved one's remains? Anecdotally, I can say that family members who are invited to the closing ceremonies of anatomy classes seem to express satisfaction and resolution. But this issue would make an interesting research project! Thanks for these provocative reflections. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED]. Thank you for participating in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. I really liked the idea of a cadaver diary – presumably written in formaldehyde! You did an impressive job of imagining so many details of the cadaver's life. The naturalness with which she referred to dessert dates, birthday parties, and ticklish places really made this woman come to life (!). The discrepancy between the richly visualized, three-dimensional person revealed by the diary, and the anonymous, efficient, and somewhat mechanical medical students makes it clear how much humanity is waiting to be discovered on that metal table, and how easily it can be missed. I enjoyed this piece of writing very much. Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED]. I enjoyed running across your account again of the first encounter with your cadaver. I'm glad you decided to submit it for the Anatomy Creative Project option. It's very, very good. I like the sense of uncertainty and discomfort that builds up – in the reader, as well as the narrator. And I absolutely love the image of student and cadaver "holding hands" for a moment before the dissection begins. In this moment, the essay transforms from the awkwardness of a "blind date" to the security, reassurance, and *comfort* that come from a mother guiding a child toward that first day at school. You really create a sense of connection, caring, respect, even love. This is a lovely essay indeed. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED]. Thank you for choosing to participate in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. I was very sorry to learn of your grandfather's death, but I agree that you used this opportunity to reflect very honestly and deeply on the connection between this tragic event and the transformation in your understanding of your anatomy experience. I was so touched by your recitation of the promises you made to your grandfather. They made me think he must have been a wonderful father and grandfather, and a caring, respectful, culturally sensitive, and very knowledgeable physician. Brian, I noticed that you mentioned rather apologetically that your essay was "a bit long." It wasn't. In fact, it was exactly the right length for what you needed to say about your loss. Remember that when you are a busy physician waiting while some old lady patient rambles on and on

about how her husband died 3 years ago, and you'll realize her story is just the right length. Thank you for sharing this story. I suspect it will always represent a significant turning point in your journey as a physician. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED] (right?). I'm glad you decided to participate in the Anatomy Creative Projects option. You sound as though you know yourself well, and have your own way of processing emotions. Your poems suggest that you are indeed an astute observer of the emotions of others. I'm impressed that you were able to generate such widely divergent efforts in terms of style and allusions.

"My Captain" is written with a more traditional meter, language, and rhyme scheme reminded me of the 19th c. Walt Whitman poem, "Captain, O My Captain." In this case, the cadaver uses the metaphor of a "vessel" in need of guidance toward safe harbor. Of course, the irony is that, although "victory is won," the Captain dies. This makes me think about the risks involved in "navigating" anatomy for the student-captain, i.e., making sure that although the anatomy is accurately mastered, the soul of the student-captain may be forfeited.

The next poem is quite different, much more modern in tone, using an easy conversational style to "chat" with the (somewhat reticent) patient-cadaver about the usual doctor-patient things: the history, the risks and benefits of the scheduled procedure, the limitations and intentions of the physician.

The third poem is, in its final lines, evocative of Robert Frost's famous account of his night-time ride on through the snow. I'm again struck by the parallels. Frost pauses in the middle of nowhere, much to the puzzlement of his little horse. How valuable it is occasionally to take a step back from the immediate exigencies of anatomy and reflect on the bigger picture. I also remember that Frost decides to go forward because he has "promises to keep," reminiscent of the promises you must keep toward your patients – and yourself.

Finally, the last poem is like something by a Beat poet, or Charles Bukowski - onomatopoeic, choppy, monosyllabic words. At first I wondered - how can such limited vocabulary really convey anything of substance? Yet by the final "zip," the reader has a vivid sense of what the experience of anatomy is like, inside and out. Thank you for putting so much effort into this work. Regards, Dr. Shapiro